

A Simple Call Between Friends

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Ash was never one to shy from a challenge, and always preferred to be straightforward rather than beating around the bush, and that was one reason why calling Serena after their adventure together ended up being so difficult. But hey, it was going to be just a simple call, how difficult would it be to make it? [Amourshipping, post-XY].

Status: complete

Published: 2018-01-15

Words: 3267

Rated: Fiction K - Language: English - Genre: Romance/Friendship - Characters: Ash K./Satoshi, Delia K./Hanako, Pikachu, Serena - Reviews: 22 - Favs: 85 - Follows: 23

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12801121/1/A-Simple-Call-Between-Friends>

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[Introduction](#)

[A Simple Call Between Friends](#)

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Ash Ketchum was, without doubt, one of the most remarkable and brave trainers to have ever come from Pallet Town. In the pursuit of his dream to be a Pokémon Master, Ash had taken part in several League Conferences, won the Orange League trophy, conquered the Battle Frontier, placed rather high in several competitions of other kinds, and saved the world more times than he could remember, all with little to no pause between them. He was always eager to jump into the next adventure, and there was little if anything that could put a dampen on his drive and courage.

Then *why* was it so hard to start that call?

Ash sighed as he placed the phone aside, while Pikachu sent him a disappointed look. Ash shook his head; he sure didn't expect the day to take such a weird turn.

The morning started as normal as ever: like every day since he returned from Kalos, he spent some time with all his Pokémon at Oak's Laboratory, starting from zero and training each and every one of them just as he resolved to do. He still hadn't decided what to do next, but he couldn't afford to slack off, and thankfully Brock, Misty and Tracey were more than willing to help in this regard. It was good to know you could rely on friends when you needed help, while asking nothing in return.

And then, there were *other* kinds of friends. The ones for which even approaching them was an adventure on its own, for some reason.

It all started in a pretty mundane way: he and his mother just finished dinner, and she had roped him into watching TV together since they barely got to spend time together anymore. Being a good son, Ash obliged and spent the rest of the evening alongside his mother, getting a good laugh of two while discussing the programs they saw.

And then, his mother happened to tune on the Contest Channel, and Ash was left speechless.

Knowing the subject matter, Ash fully expected to see Dawn or May pop up on the screen, and was very surprised to see a much different yet familiar face pop up on the screen, apparently a live broadcast of the Slateport City Pokémon Contest: Serena, smiling and striding to the center of the stage, where she tossed a Poké Ball skyward and Braixen gracefully landed on the ground. And then, her appeal began. Braixen danced around the stage as she fired several Hidden Powers, twirling her wand around as she fired a flamethrower at the same time: the blaze surrounded the spheres with honed expertise, without shattering any of them. Braixen continued to dance elegantly all the same, before ending her routine by stabbing the sky with one swift Flamethrower, destroying all the Hidden Powers in a colorful array of fireworks.

Ash couldn't help but be mesmerized by Serena's appeal. It wasn't that different from the Performances she saw her practice and execute with her team throughout their Kalos journey, but in the familiar context of Contests he couldn't help but notice something unique to Serena; May loved gambles and improvisation in her routines, while Dawn favored much more flashy and increasingly elaborate combinations. Serena's appeal felt much more spontaneous, as if she and Braixen had no problem at all coming up with it. No doubt a result of how her Performances slowly evolved with each Showcase she took part in. Contests and Showcases were never Ash's thing, but even he could tell how much his friend had improved.

In fact, he spent the rest of the broadcast cheering Serena on alongside his mother, sure that she would've won the ribbon in the end, and as she slowly made her way to the final round, there was little doubt she would've made it. However, that was when things took an unexpected turn.

The last round consisted of a battle between a Kirlia and Pancham, with both sides trading blows in the most elegant and flashy way

possible: Stone Edges shattered Shadow Balls, Protect and Fairy Wind blew away Arm Thrusts, Dark Pulse blocked Psybeam, and several other combinations followed. Of all of Serena's Pokémon Pancham was definitely the more battle-ready, and it made sense to use him. However, the opponent's double type advantage ultimately proved too much for Pancham, even as him and Serena tried their best to make up for the handicap, and the little Fighting-type eventually fell. Serena's bar emptied completely, and victory went to her opponent as the crowd erupted in clapping and cheers.

Ash couldn't help but feel a tinge of disappointment at that turn, but that was short-lived as he saw Serena grab Pancham on her arms, give a bright smile to the crowd, and shaking hands with her opponent with maturity and respect. It was an all too familiar sight, both from personal experience and for his friends', but it really showed the gracefulness and earnestness a Kalos Queen-to-be should possess.

However, even as his mother changed channels and they continued to absent-mindedly follow, Ash couldn't stop thinking about that. Maybe it was force of habit after several losses, but he did know how hard one could hit. He *knew* that Serena could take one well, too, but for some reason the thought of how she was feeling nagged at him. It was apparently pretty obvious as even his mother picked up on it, and Ash quickly told her of the conundrum. And that was when his mother smiled and gave a simple suggestion.

"Why don't you call her?"

After that, Ash ended up staring at the phone for the better part of the last ten minutes, constantly mulling over the device. And it was absolutely infuriating.

As he lowered the handset again, Ash sighed. He had spoken often with all his friends after their time as companions ended, and yet he never felt this uneasiness at the prospect of calling them. He was always eager to play catchup and know what everyone of his friends had been doing, be it Max's latest studies or the newest place Iris

had travelled to. It wasn't worry that too much time had passed either, given it had not even been a week since they went separate ways.

Well, he probably knew the reason, but it wasn't something Ash liked to think about. It all started after a training session with Brock: they talked about the latest things they had been up to, and he'd let slip to his old friend of how Serena had kissed him as her farewell. This was followed up by Brock acting like he used to whenever Professor Ivy was mentioned, then asking him in a sorta-desperate tone how did he find a girl before him. It left Ash and Pikachu rather dumbfounded, but it did let one thing sink in: Serena liked him, and not just as a friend. He could be very dense at times, but he *did* understand the implications.

Throughout his Kalos journey he never really gave much thought of how he felt about Serena: he had travelled with many girls before, and he assumed that they were just friends that pushed each other to do their best. It was only after the kiss that he put a lot of Serena's behavior in perspective and understood the real intent behind it. He was never much of a romantic person, and so, thinking that someone might've liked him that way always felt pretty weird: all the girls that expressed interest in him tended to be the ones he met on the way like Melody and Bianca from Alto Mare, and never ones he travelled with.

Did he like Serena? Ash wasn't sure how to answer that. He enjoyed spending time with her, she was someone that always gave him the strength to carry on, and she was quite sweet, that was for sure, but at the same time, he had spent months travelling with her without realizing of her feelings, and even after sorting his own out he still didn't have a clear answer, leaving how he felt as a giant Donphan in the living room. The chances of calling her and not ending up talking of their feelings was next to none, and yet, he didn't feel like he wanted to avoid her either.

Ash sighed as he placed the handset aside. He was doing way too much thinking for his liking, and it was probably best to wait another

day to call Serena than risk to ruin anything between them. However, a certain Electric-type wasn't of the same opinion.

After giving his trainer a disappointed look, Pikachu leapt off Ash's shoulder and grabbed the handset, tossing it back to Ash; he grabbed it hapzardly, gave it a glance, and then stared back at his friend. "Wait, Pikachu, what are you-"

Ash froze as he saw Pikachu smash his paws on the buttons, ending on the call one. Ash widened his eyes, while Pikachu folded his arms and smirked back at him. Caught in the moment, Ash wasn't sure if to scold him or close the call immediately. His trained reflexes favored putting the headset back in place, and that's what he did.

Until the screen lit up, and a familiar honey-blonde Performer gave him a quizzical glance. Ash stood there, motionless and with mouth agape.

"Uhm, hello?" Serena asked.

Ash gulped as he stared back at the screen, where Serena was waiting for a response. He pursed his lips and gulped as he shot a glare towards Pikachu; someone would not see ketchup for a good month, now...

He quickly looked back at Serena with a sheepish smile. "Hey."

"Ash, what a surprise! How have you been?" Serena beamed back at him, leaning a bit closer to the screen.

"Pretty good, I'm still in Pallet and training my team." Ash rubbed his neck, only to take a deep breath. With the call ongoing, he could probably afford to go straight to the point. "I've watched your latest Contest."

Serena blinked in surprise, before she rubbed her neck in embarassment. "I see. Not my best performance, I know, but I'm still not good at battling."

"You did pretty well actually, Braixen and Pancham were awesome and you managed to hold your own up to the last second. I can tell you and your team have been putting your all in training."

"Thanks." Serena sighed briefly, then she smiled again. "But I still lost, there's no reason to sugarcoat it. We've still got a long road ahead if we want to win more Ribbons."

Ash clutched the handset tightly, a worried frown forming on his face. "You don't need to be so hard on yourself."

Serena's smile didn't falter; if anything, it grew wider as she shook her head and stared back at Ash. She held a hand over her chest, and her posture turned firm.

"I'm pretty happy with how the Contest turned out, actually. Sure, I didn't win, but I could see and hear the enthusiasm of the crowd. Maybe it was more for my opponent than me, but if I helped even just a bit with making the crowd happier, than I have no regrets.

"And if you enjoyed it from Pallet Town, then I'm even more happy." Her smile morphed into a confident, yet warm smirk. "I've still got a long road ahead to reach my dream, and until then I wish to spread happiness as much as I can. After all, nothing we do is pointless, right?"

Ash chuckled at that, all the tension from before abandoning his body. That was the Serena he knew, the one capable of raising from defeat stronger than before, and always willing to help out others. It was something he was all too familiar with, but seeing it from someone who started her journey without a dream was something that never failed to make Ash smile.

"You've really grown, Serena." Ash adjusted his hat and perked his head up. "You'll be an amazing Kalos Queen in the future."

"Thanks." Serena blushed just a bit as she clutched her blue ribbon, before she recomposed herself and sent Ash an inquisitive look.

"What have you been doing, instead?"

"Mostly training my team and preparing for the future. I needed a short break."

"But that's not going to stop you from travelling again." Serena gave him a sly smile. It wasn't a question, and they both knew the answer already.

"Never." Ash grinned once more, fist pumped and gaze set ahead. "My dream is to become a Pokémon Master, and me and my team won't let anything get in the way of it. We'll grow together with each battle we fight, and one day, we will stand as the best trainers in the world. no matter how much time and effort we'll need to make it."

"That's the Ash I know." She sent him a playful wink. "I look forward to see you crown your dream."

Ash replied with a quick nod. "And I look forward to see you crown yours."

They both smiled, and even if silence fell briefly between them, neither was embarrassed. It was just like old times: they talked, supported each other, and generally had a good time together, even now that they were several miles apart. Absolutely nothing changed, and Ash almost wondered what he was so afraid of to begin with at that point.

Then, Serena tilted her head and sent the trainer a quizzical look. "Though, did you just call me to say that?"

All the tension from before came back and hit Ash like a truck, as the trainer froze again. There it was, the Donphan in the living room. It was clear what Serena really wanted to ask, and he still had no idea what to answer. He needed time to think, to understand his feelings, and-

Ash adjusted the rim of his hat, covering his eyes and gripping the headset tightly once again. It was no use to get too fussed about what he should've done: he was Ash Ketchum, and improvisation led him to victory more than once. It was time to put that skill to good use.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm very proud of how far you've come since we met in Santalune City." He looked back to Serena, fondness shining in his eyes. "You've helped me a lot during our Kalos journey, and here you are, trying to make others happy and ask for nothing in return. I've travelled with a lot of different trainers, coordinators and everything else, but you're among one of the most amazing people I've ever met."

Serena didn't know what to say, simply observing her friend. Ash took it as a good sign, and breathed in again.

"I've never been too good at speeches or using big words, really..." His sheepish grin came back as he scratched his cheek, but he still managed to look over Serena proudly. "But I know you will reach your dream one day, too. Don't let anyone stop you, and if you're ever lost or worried, well... I'll always be there for you."

Ash stopped, and he could feel his cheeks being much warmer than usual. Serena remained silent, and for a moment, Ash worried to have gone at it the wrong way, hand shaking around the handset. Fortunately, however, she gave him a grateful gaze and Ash's worries melted away.

"Thanks, Ash." As she touched her ribbon, Serena beamed once more. "Wherever you'll go next, don't slack off, and make sure to always be in top shape with your Pokémon, alright?"

"I always will. But you do the same, alright?"

Serena chuckled happily. "I will, too!"

A known five-note jingle played, and Serena briefly looked towards the Pokémon Center's main desk before she turned to Ash again. "Looks like I need to go now. Thanks for calling me, I really appreciated it!"

"Same for me. We should do more calls like these." Ash felt his face gain quite a few shades of red, wondering where that even came from.

Serena barely suppressed a large grin. "I'd love to! I've actually bought the latest PokéNav model, with call function and the like. I can give you the number, if you want."

"Sure!" Ash smiled back once more.

And thus, Serena shared her PokéNav number, and the conversation quickly ended as Serena needed to pick her Pokémon back, with the two waving and smiling at each other before she left Ash to stare at the black screen almost suddenly. Compared to how hard it was to even start the call, it was quite refreshing to end a simple call on simple terms.

Because that was it: just a simple call between friends, one he managed to do without a hitch. Nothing more, nothing less. Though that didn't explain why his heart was still racing that much as he thought back to it...

Ash shook his head and took a deep breath. He already had enough weird feelings for the whole day, he could wait to figure *that* part out in full.

He gave a quick glance at his friend sitting on the furniture. "Say, are you up for some more training?"

Pikachu nodded back at his best friend and jumped on his shoulder, and Ash couldn't help but notice the snickering from the Electric-type. The trainer let it slide, however, as they headed out of the

house and back towards Oak's Lab, far more energy surging in their bodies as they walked through Pallet Town.

If nothing else, he had a promise to keep with Serena now. Friend, girlfriend, something in between, he didn't care: Serena was someone special for him, and he had no intention to let her down.

This is a pretty out of nowhere story compared to my usual repertoire, but I really had an itch to write an Amourshipping piece, and also to take a bit of a pause from my Reset works. That's not to say that I'm quitting, but after a year mostly focused on that, I wanted to share something unique for a change. It wasn't a particularly ambitious tale overall, but I hope you liked it and that I made Ash in-character through it all. I might eventually make more stuff set during this time period from time to time given the time between XY and SM is a rare implied time skip where Ash is at home before a journey instead of departing right away, and it can be useful ground for some fun stories in my opinion. In any case, it was fun trying something new, and I hope to bring you all some good stories throughout the year.

I thank everyone that helped me bringing this idea to life, including Ander Arias and RandomificationChaotic, and all of my friends. This is dedicated to all of you. Also, many thanks to Vinylshadow for the cover.

That said, I once more hope you enjoyed it, and see you next time!